OUTRAGEOUS 1950s EC COMICS!

INCREDIBLE SCIENCE FICTION

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INCREDIBLE SCIENCE FICTION

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FALLEN IDOL

WE FOUND THE GOD ON THE THIRD DAY. WE'D CROSSED THE MIGHTY RIVER TO THE DEAD PLACE, AND THIS TIME, THE GREAT MANY-LEGGED BEASTS HAD NOT TAKEN THEIR TOLL OF US. WE'D SOUGHT THE MAGIC OF THE OLD ONES ...AND ON THE THIRD DAY, IN A HOLLOW MADE BY FALLEN BEAMS OF METAL, WE FOUND THE GOD. AND THE OTHERS FELL UPON THEIR FACES AND WORSHIPPED...

THE OTHERS GROVELED IN THE DUST BEFORE THE GOD, BUT I DID NOT. THE GOD STOOD WITH HIS MIGHTY ARMS UPRAISED, AND ON HIS BREAST WAS THE SYMBOL OF THE LIGHTNING. YET EVEN SO, I DID NOT GROVEL. I KNEW!

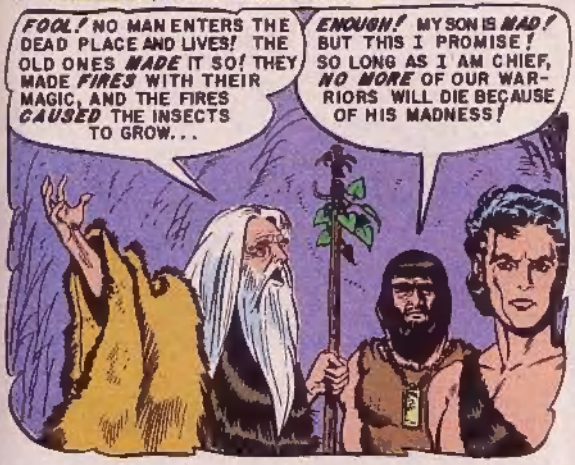
I KNEW THAT THIS GOD WAS NOT A GOD, BUT WAS WHAT THE OLD ONES HAD CALLED A ROBOT! I REMEMBERED THE TALES I'D HEARD... AS A CHILD...

THE OLD ONES HAD GREAT MAGIC IN THOSE DAYS. THEY BUILT MACHINES... CALLED ROBOTS... AND THE ROBOTS BUILT MORE ROBOTS. AND ONLY THE ROBOTS TOILED...
I REMEMBERED THE TALES. BUT I DID NOT SPEAK. FOR I WAS BARD, THE CHIEF... AND THE SON OF A CHIEF... AND WISE! I DID NOT SPEAK, FOR I KNEW THAT THE OTHERS WERE REMEMBERING OTHER TALES...
... THE GODS WERE MANY, LONG AGO! AND THE GREATEST OF ALL WAS THE GOD HERCULES! HIS ARMS WERE IRON... AND HE CARRIED THE LIGHTNING ON HIS BREAST...
ALL THIS I KNEW, YET I SPOKE NOT. FOR THE OTHERS WERE NOT WISE AS I WAS WISE. THEY DID NOT KNOW THAT WE HAD FOUND SOMETHING STRONGER THAN MAGIC...
UP! ON YOUR FEET! THE SUN WILL SOON BE SETTING! WE MUST RE-CROSS THE RIVER BEFORE DARK!
WE STARTED BACK... AND I DREAMED. I SAW MEN ONCE AGAIN STRIDING ACROSS THE EARTH LIKE GIANTS... MASTERS. AND IT WAS ALL SO SIMPLE...
WE WILL BUILD AGAIN...
THERE'D BEEN NO MAGIC! WE'D FOUND A MACHINE, WE HAD ONLY TO MASTER ITS SECRETS. I SMILED THEN... REMEMBERING WHAT THE PRIEST HAD TOLD ME SO LONG AGO...
THE DEAD PLACE?! THE DEAD PLACE IS FORBIDDEN! THE OLD ONES DESTROYED IT WITH THEIR MAGIC! BEWARE, LEST THEIR MAGIC DESTROY YOU AS WELL!
NO, THERE'D BEEN NO MAGIC. BUT I HAD NOT KNOWN THAT THEN! I HAD NOT SEEN THE SCORCHED RUINS THEN! EVEN WHEN I HAD FOUND OTHERS LIKE MYSELF... YOUNG AND BOLD... I HAD BEEN AFRAID...
WE'D POLED OUR RAFT ACROSS THE MIGHTY RIVER TO THE DEAD PLACE AND WE'D GONE ASHORE, SHAKING IN OUR FEAR...

AND THEN, THE MONSTERS HAD ATTACKED... THE GIANT, MANY-LEGGED MONSTERS...

THE LEGENDS HAD TOLD OF MONSTERS SUCH AS THOSE... MONSTERS FOUND ONLY IN THE DEAD PLACE. THEY'D BEEN CREATED SOMEHOW BY THE VERY FIRES THAT HAD MADE THE DEAD PLACE DEAD... THE VERY FIRES OF THE OLD ONES THEMSELVES. I'D FLED WITH THE OTHERS, THEN... IN FEAR. AND SOME OF US HAD DIED...

AND WHEN I'D RETURNED ACROSS THE MIGHTY RIVER, ONLY MY CHIEF'S BLOOD HAD SAVED ME FROM THE WRATH OF THE PRIEST, AND OF MY FATHER...



BUT MY DREAM HAD BEEN A STRONG DREAM. I HAD NOT FORGOTTEN MY DREAM. THE DEAD PLACE WAS FORBIDDEN TO ME, BUT I'D DREAMED OF GOING BACK, SOMEDAY, AND FINDING THE OLD ONE'S MAGIC...

I'D WATCHED, AND I'D LEARNED, AND I'D HUNGERED FOR THE TIME WHEN I COULD LEAD MY PEOPLE TO A BETTER LIFE. I'D SEEN THEM HUNGER... FREEZE...

...AND I'D WAITED, DREAMING OF A GLORIOUS NEW BEGINNING FOR MEN. AND THEN, ONE DAY, MY WAITING WAS OVER...

I'D WAITED, AND ONE DAY, MY FATHER WAS NO MORE AND I WAS CHIEF. I'D MADE A FINAL RESTING PLACE FOR HIM, AND THEN I'D SPOKEN...

NOW, I AM CHIEF! TOMORROW, WE CROSS THE RIVER TO THE *DEAD PLACE!*

NO! WE WILL NOT FOLLOW A CHIEF WHO IS *MAD!*

IF THERE *IS* MAGIC IN THE DEAD PLACE, IT IS *EVIL MAGIC!* WE *KNOW* YOUR FOOLISH DREAM! BUT WE WILL NOT *DIE* FOR IT!

YOU WILL CROSS THE RIVER WITH ME *TOMORROW*... OR *DIE NOW!* THE *CHOICE IS YOURS!*

ONE MAN, MADE BOLD BY THE PRIEST, HAD SPOKEN AGAINST ME. THERE'D BEEN NO OTHER WAY.

FOLLOW ME TO THE DEAD PLACE... OR DIE! ANSWER! WHICH SHALL IT BE!

I... I WILL FOLLOW!

IT WAS FOR THEM THAT I'D DREAMED... TO MAKE THEM ONCE MORE GREAT. AND YET, IT HAD BEEN ONLY THEIR FEAR OF ME THAT HAD MADE THEM OBEY, THE NEXT DAY...

LASH THE LOGS SECURELY! THE CURRENT IS SWIFT!

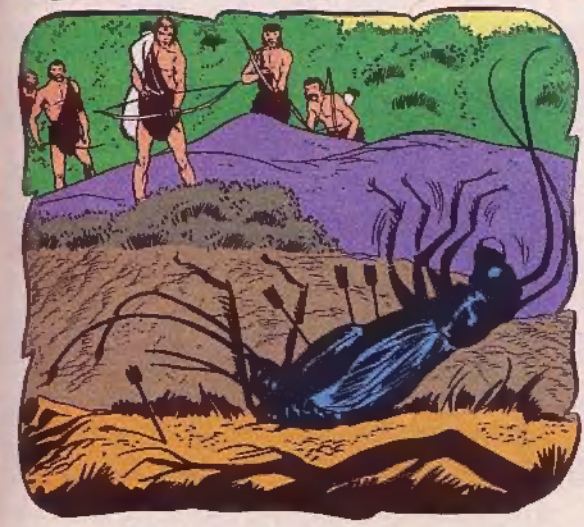
THEY'D MUTTERED AND HATED ME, BUT THAT DAY I'D CROSSED THE MIGHTY WATERS ONCE AGAIN. AND I'D LEARNED MUCH. THIS TIME, I'D CHOSEN A FLAT PLACE TO LAND... FAR FROM THE ROCKY PLACES...

YOU! GO BEFORE US! WATCH WELL THE *DARK, ROCKY PLACES!* FOR IT IS *THERE* THAT THE MANY-LEGGED MONSTERS MAKE THEIR DENS!

THIS TIME, I'D SENT A MAN AHEAD AND THE REST OF US HAD FOLLOWED. AND MY WISDOM HAD MADE THE WAY EASY...

THOSE ROCKS! THE MANY-LEGGED MONSTERS ARE THERE!

THEN WE SHALL GO *AROUND* THE ROCKS!



AH, THAT HAD BEEN A VICTORY! THE WARRIOR'S EYES UPON ME HAD BEEN DIFFERENT THEN. AND WE'D GONE ON...

WE'D GONE ON... AND THERE'D BEEN NOTHING...

ONE DAY...TWO DAYS...THREE DAYS WE'D SEARCHED. AND WE'D FOUND NO MAGIC! THERE'D BEEN ONLY THE SILENCE OF DEATH! AND THEN, IN THE DARK PLACE AMID THE RUINS, I'D SEEN THE METALLIC GLEAM...

THERE'D BEEN SOMETHING WRAPPED IN A SEALED, PROTECTIVE GARMENT... A GARMENT OF METAL, GLEAMING BRIGHT ON THE OUTSIDE AND BLACK WITHIN. I'D DRAWN MY STONE KNIFE AND RIPPED IT AWAY...

THE OTHERS HAD FALLEN UPON THEIR FACES AND WORSHIPPED...

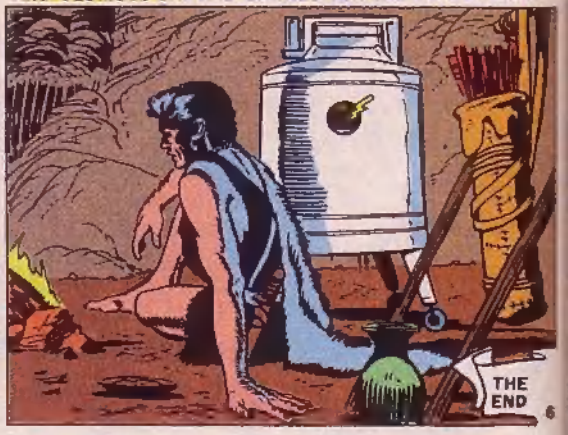
...BUT I'D KNOWN WHAT WE'D FOUND! AND SO, I MADE THEM RISE AND BUILD A LITTER AND LIFT WHAT WE'D FOUND AND CARRY IT OUT...BACK DOWN TO THE MIGHTY RIVER...TO THE RAFT...

WE RETURNED TO THE TRIBE, AND I KNEW THAT ONE DAY THE OLD WAYS WOULD RETURN. I HAD ONLY TO LEARN HOW TO MAKE THE ROBOT DO MY BIDDING...

ONE DAY, WE WOULD BUILD AGAIN. BUT, UNTIL THEN, HOW COULD I TELL THE OTHERS THAT WHAT WE'D FOUND WAS *NOT* A GOD?

NO! I COULD NOT! LET THEM THINK WHAT THEY WOULD! THEY HAD NOT MY WISDOM! THERE WOULD BE TIME ENOUGH LATER TO SPEAK THE TRUTH, WHEN I'D LEARNED TO *MASTER* THE MACHINE...

TIME ENOUGH, LATER...AFTER I'D FOUND THE WAY! AFTER I'D UNLOCKED THE SECRET OF THE MACHINE AND A NEW AND GLORIOUS DAY HAD DAWNED FOR THE RACE OF MEN...



FAILURE

The ship hung a thousand miles above Earth, like a black forecast of doom. But the aliens were in no hurry. First, there was the usual council of war. After all, a space ship, even a giant intergalactic cruiser, could carry only so much fuel, only so much destructive force. It would not do to dissipate either needlessly. Yet, by the same token, the ship's mission was to seek out and destroy any life, on any planet, which might one day challenge the domination of the aliens' home world.

Quietly, leisurely, the war council decided. The planet below showed definite signs of intelligent life. Therefore, it must be destroyed. Ind, the ship's commander, gave the order: "Battle procedure, all beams and destructive devices, full power."

The alien ship dropped. Not swiftly. There was ample time. And from his control screen Ind watched the bluish ball below grow larger, larger . . .

"Full halt! Hover!" The order rapped from his lips suddenly.

Carefully, Ind studied the foreign object on his screen. It had shot up from the blue ball, trailing fire. Small, sleek, glistening.

"A rocket! Salvage crew will bring it aboard."

It took only moments. The magnetic grapplers drew the rocket close, through an open lock. There was no resistance. Soon, the gleaming needle was before Ind.

"Life energy within, sir." That was one of the techs.

A power torch cut through the rocket's metal—and then it happened. Pandemonium. The earth creatures leaped through the opening. For a split second they stood, staring at their captors. By comparison with the aliens they were tiny—and in their eyes was none of the cold, inhuman intelligence which marked the aliens. In their eyes was—idiocy, nothingness. In their eyes was terror, no more. A terror which made them leap from where they stood, to beat against the alien ship's walls, to slam against crewmen, screaming and chattering, unreasoning.

"Cut them down." Ind had seen enough. These were not creatures to fear. These earth creatures were not reasoning beings, despite their rocket, despite their technology.

A beam lanced out, charred the earth creatures into nothingness.

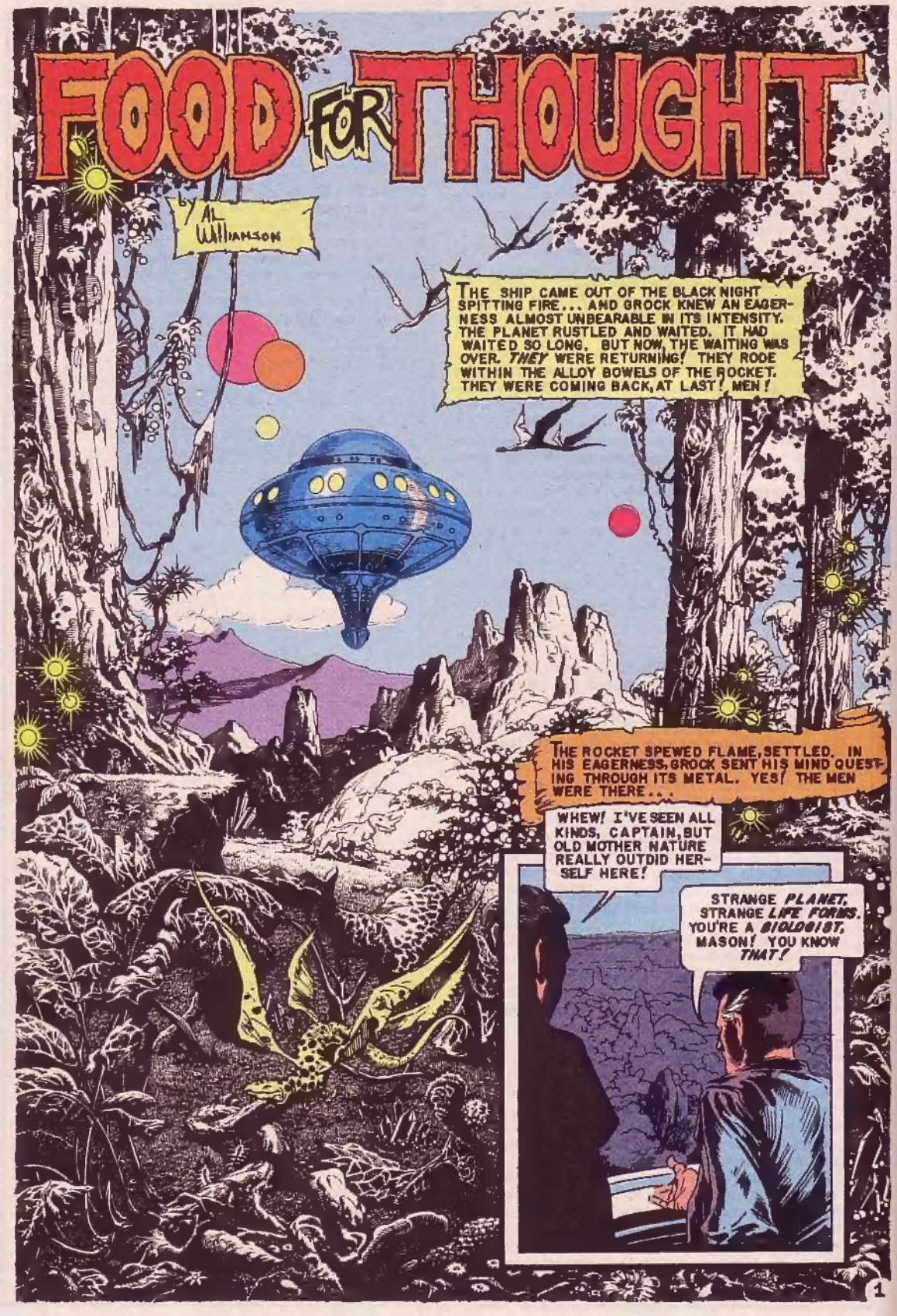
Ind turned to his second in command. "Battle orders rescinded. We have nothing to do here. We go on."

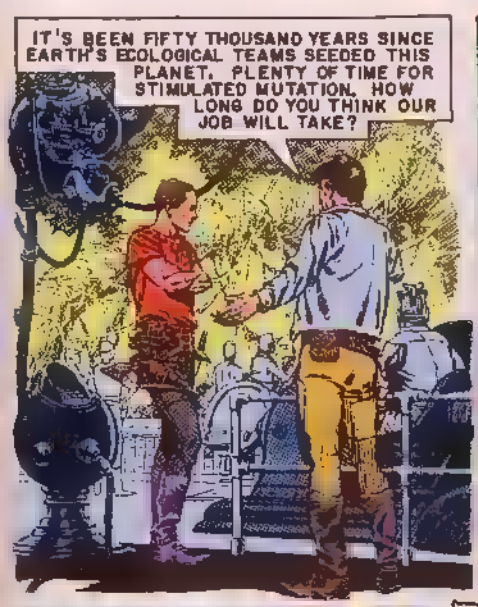
The alien ship moved, gathered speed—and vanished. So swiftly that in seconds it was light years distant. It would never return . . .

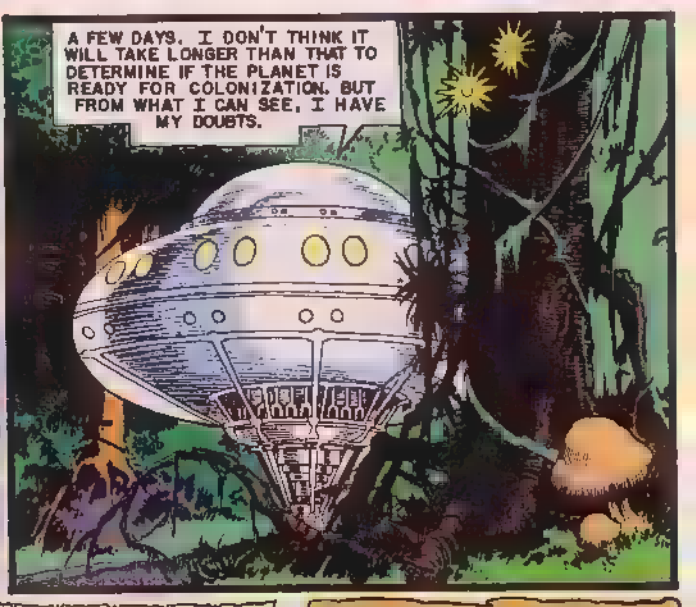
— — —

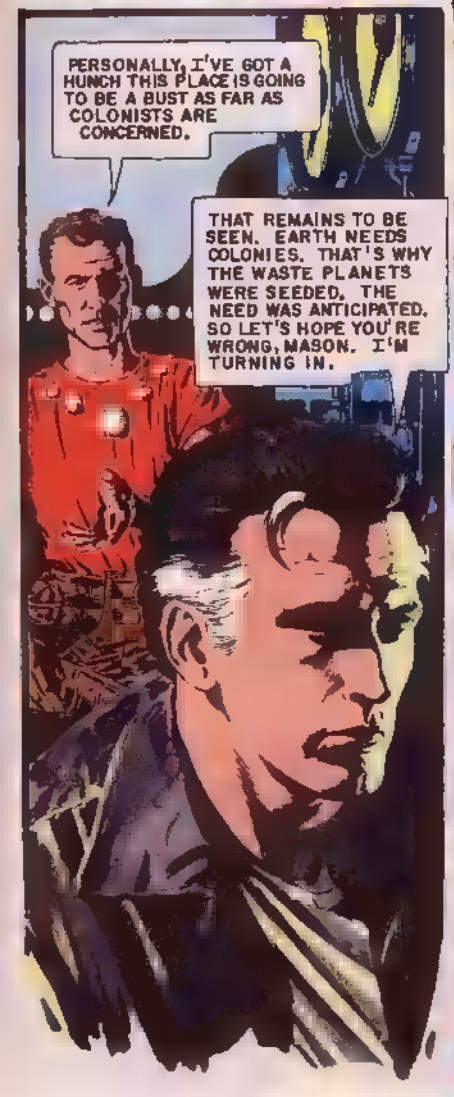
Doctor Steven Crane, deep within the bowels of his concrete bunker at White Sands took his eyes from the instruments before him and turned to his assistant: "No signal, Andy. Nothing. The rocket must have disintegrated in space. I guess—we've failed."

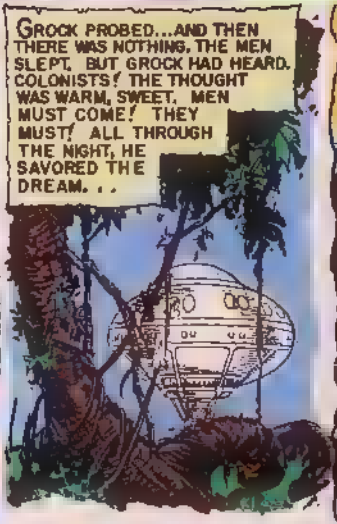
Experimental Rocket C8—failure. That was how the record would note it. A pity. Crane had had high hopes. Yet he could still think of the rocket's passengers. "Too bad," he sighed. "Poor little monkeys. It seems a shame that they had to die—for nothing."

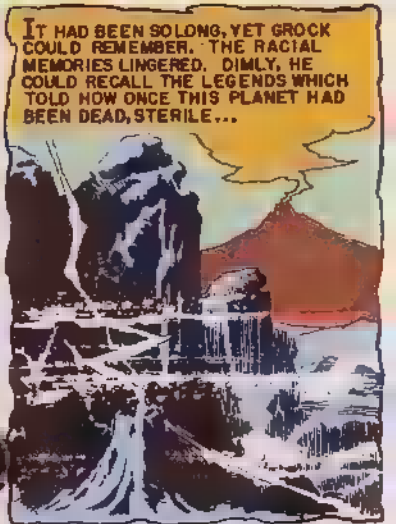

FOOD FOR THOUGHT
by Al Williamson
THE SHIP CAME OUT OF THE BLACK NIGHT SPITTING FIRE... AND GROCK KNEW AN EAGERNESS ALMOST UNBEARABLE IN ITS INTENSITY. THE PLANET RUSTLED AND WAITED. IT HAD WAITED SO LONG. BUT NOW, THE WAITING WAS OVER. THEY WERE RETURNING! THEY RODE WITHIN THE ALLOY BOWELS OF THE ROCKET. THEY WERE COMING BACK, AT LAST! MEN!
THE ROCKET SPEWED FLAME, SETTLED. IN HIS EAGERNESS, GROCK SENT HIS MIND QUESTING THROUGH ITS METAL. YES! THE MEN WERE THERE...
WHEW! I'VE SEEN ALL KINDS, CAPTAIN, BUT OLD MOTHER NATURE REALLY OUTDID HERSELF HERE!
STRANGE PLANET. STRANGE LIFE FORMS. YOU'RE A BIOLOGIST, MASON! YOU KNOW THAT!

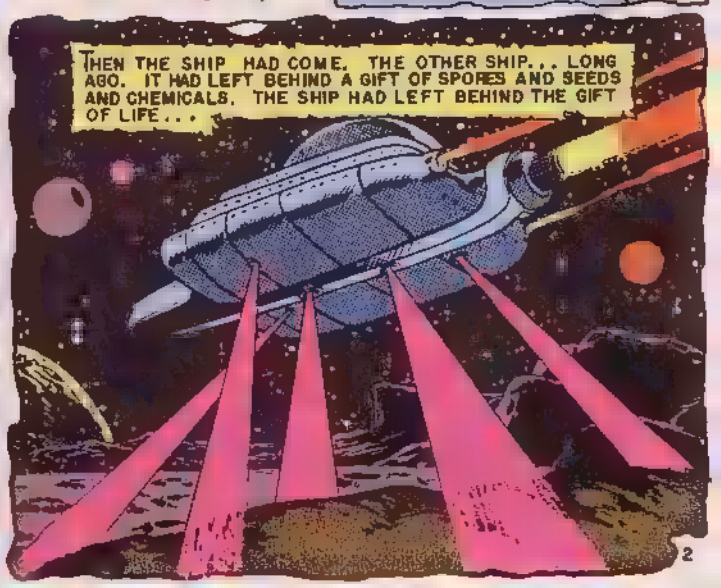

IT'S BEEN FIFTY THOUSAND YEARS SINCE EARTH'S ECOLOGICAL TEAMS SEEDED THIS PLANET. PLENTY OF TIME FOR STIMULATED MUTATION. HOW LONG DO YOU THINK OUR JOB WILL TAKE?


A FEW DAYS. I DON'T THINK IT WILL TAKE LONGER THAN THAT TO DETERMINE IF THE PLANET IS READY FOR COLONIZATION. BUT FROM WHAT I CAN SEE, I HAVE MY DOUBTS.


PERSONALLY, I'VE GOT A HUNCH THIS PLACE IS GOING TO BE A BUST AS FAR AS COLONISTS ARE CONCERNED.
THAT REMAINS TO BE SEEN. EARTH NEEDS COLONIES. THAT'S WHY THE WASTE PLANETS WERE SEEDED. THE NEED WAS ANTICIPATED. SO LET'S HOPE YOU'RE WRONG, MASON. I'M TURNING IN.


GROCK PROBED...AND THEN THERE WAS NOTHING. THE MEN SLEPT. BUT GROCK HAD HEARD. COLONISTS! THE THOUGHT WAS WARM, SWEET. MEN MUST COME! THEY MUST! ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT, HE SAVORED THE DREAM. . .


IT HAD BEEN SO LONG, YET GROCK COULD REMEMBER. THE RACIAL MEMORIES LINGERED. DIMLY, HE COULD RECALL THE LEGENDS WHICH TOLD HOW ONCE THIS PLANET HAD BEEN DEAD, STERILE...


THEN THE SHIP HAD COME. THE OTHER SHIP... LONG AGO. IT HAD LEFT BEHIND A GIFT OF SPORES AND SEEDS AND CHEMICALS. THE SHIP HAD LEFT BEHIND THE GIFT OF LIFE...

THE SHIP HAD COME AND GONE. AND LIFE HAD TAKEN HOLD... ON THIS DEAD, STERILE PLANET...

SLOWLY AT FIRST... A TINY SHOOT... A MICROSCOPIC ANIMAL. THEN, AS TIME CREPT BY...

YES, MAN HAD BROUGHT LIFE. AND MAN'S SCIENCE HAD IMPREGNATED THAT LIFE SO THAT IT CHANGED, EVOLVED ... SWIFTLY...

FOR HALF A THOUSAND CENTURIES, THE PLANET HAD FLOWERED... AND WAITED. AND NOW, MAN HAD RETURNED...

WE'LL SPLIT INTO TWO PARTIES AS USUAL. YOU ALL KNOW WHAT WE WANT. SAMPLES OF ANIMAL LIFE FORMS, PARTICULARLY *INTELLIGENT* ANIMAL LIFE.

I DON'T THINK WE'LL *FIND* MUCH, CAPTAIN! LOOK THERE!

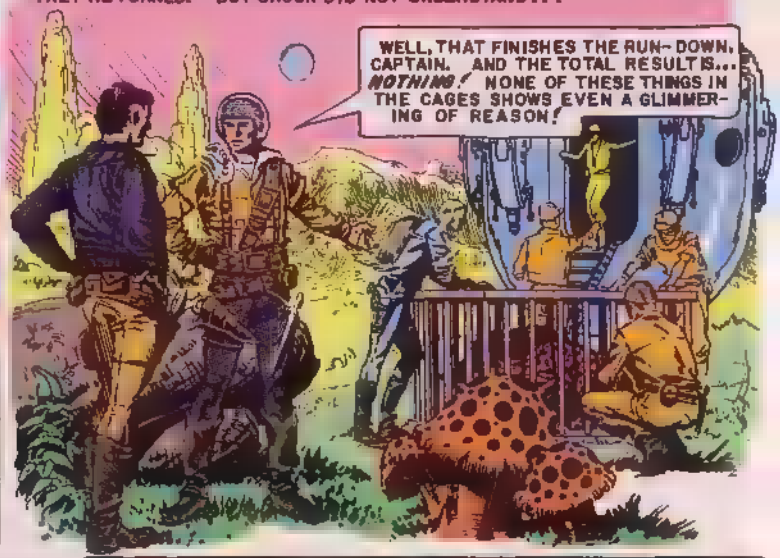
THOSE BONES PROVE THAT THERE ARE *MEAT EATERS* HERE. AND *NONE* OF THE INTELLIGENT RACES EAT MEAT ANY LONGER. NOT EVEN *MAN!*

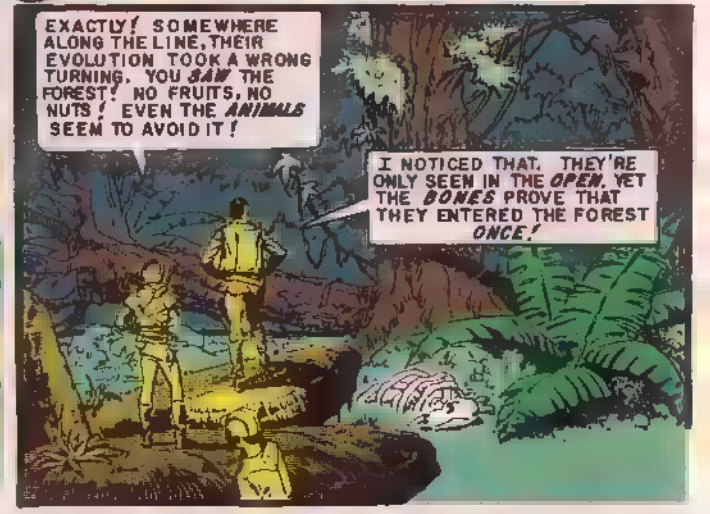
STILL, MAN *DID* EAT MEAT ONCE, MASON! AND MAN *WAS* INTELLIGENT! SO WHO KNOWS? LET'S GO!

GROCK YEARNED. HIS THOUGHTS REACHED OUT. "COME NEAR, MEN! LET ME SAVOR THE SWEETNESS!" BUT THE MEN DID NOT COME NEAR...

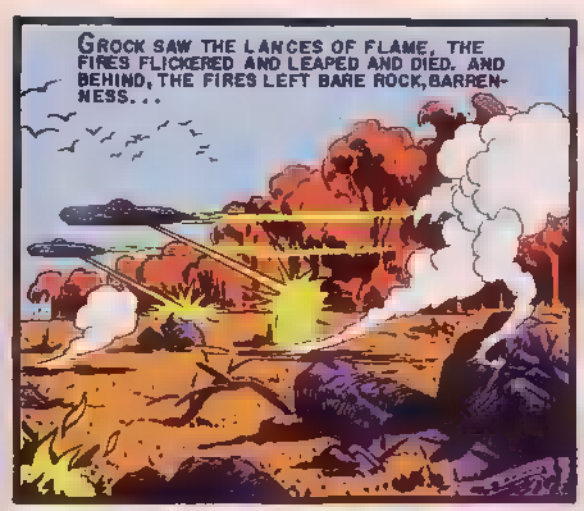
THE MEN DID NOT COME NEAR, AND GROCK TREMBLED WITH DISAPPOINTMENT. ALL HIS THOUGHTS WERE OF THEM IN THE LONG DAYS AFTER...

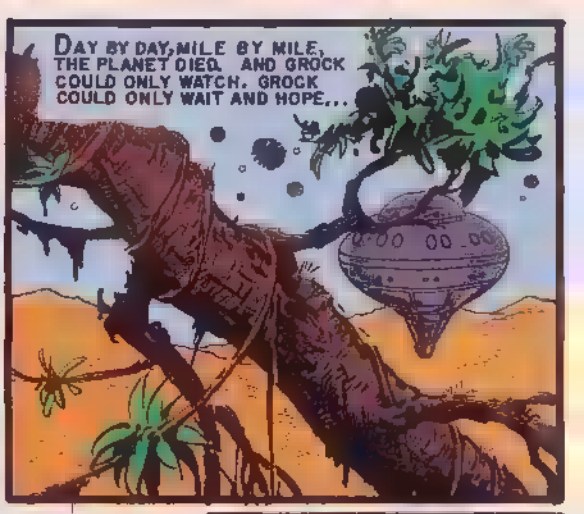
IT WAS GOOD TO HAVE THEM NEAR AGAIN AT LAST. ON THE THIRD DAY THEY RETURNED. BUT GROCK DID NOT UNDERSTAND...

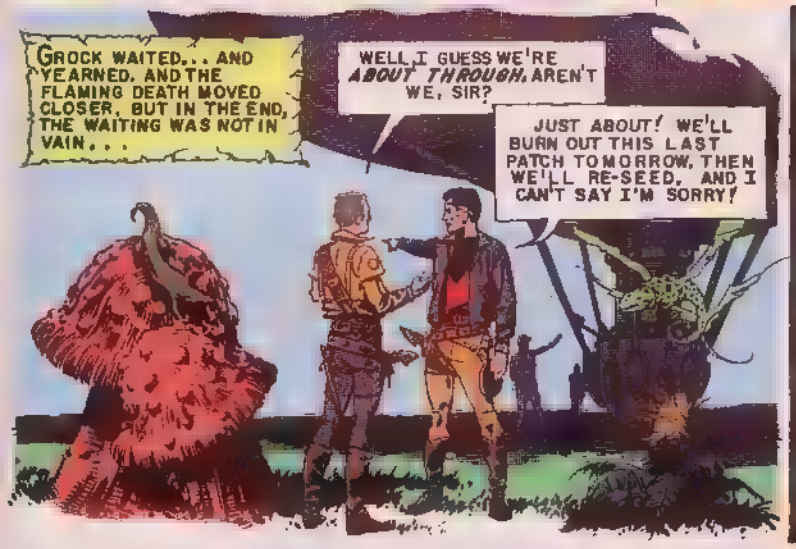


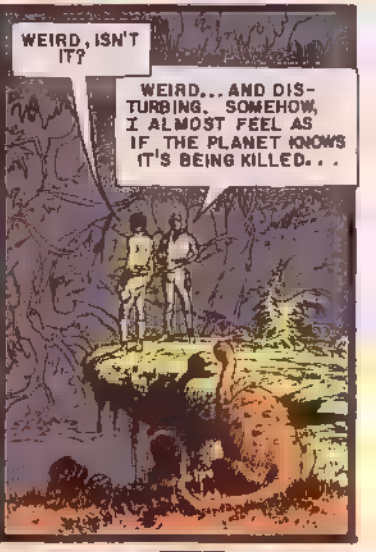


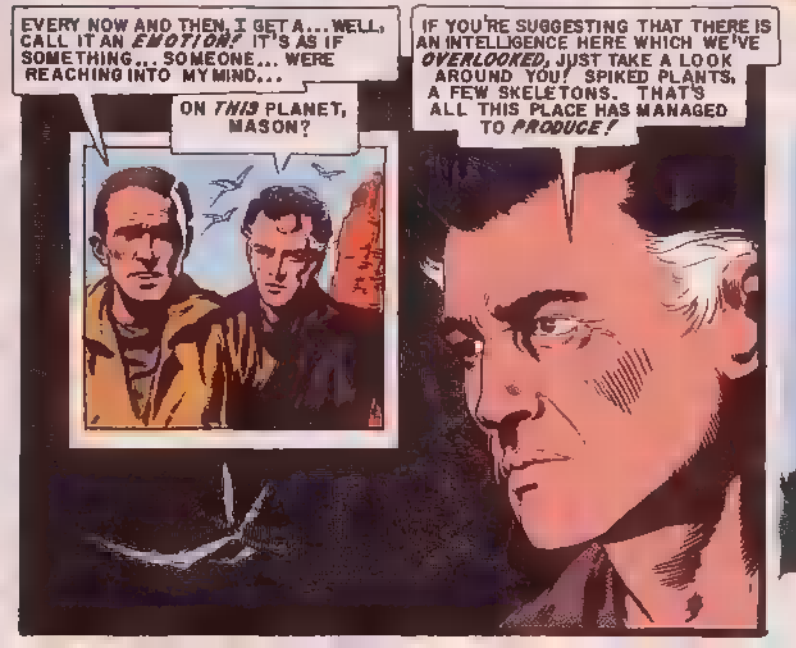
NO! GROCK ALMOST SCREAMED THE WORD. BUT THE MEN WOULD NOT HAVE HEARD, EVEN IF HE HAD. THEIR MINDS WERE... DIFFERENT...
STILL, THERE SEEMS TO BE NO CHOICE! EARTH NEEDS ROOM FOR HER EXCESS POPULATION. WE'LL USE THIS SPOT AS A BASE OF OPERATIONS...
■ THE MORNING WE BEGIN OPERATION BURN-OUT! AND SMALL LOSS!
MAN HAD COME. AND NOW, MAN WAS GOING TO DESTROY! BUT THE MEN WERE WRONG! THERE WAS INTELLIGENT LIFE HERE! THERE WAS! ONLY, HOW COULD GROCK MAKE THE MEN UNDERSTAND?
HOW COULD GROCK TELL THEM, EVEN IF THERE WERE A MEANS OF COMMUNICATING WITH THEM, WITHOUT DESTROYING HIMSELF?
THERE WAS NO WAY. AND SO GROCK SAW, THAT NEXT MORNING...


GROCK SAW THE LANCES OF FLAME, THE FIRES FLICKERED AND LEAPED AND DIED. AND BEHIND, THE FIRES LEFT BARE ROCK, BARRENNESS...


DAY BY DAY, MILE BY MILE, THE PLANET DIED. AND GROCK COULD ONLY WATCH. GROCK COULD ONLY WAIT AND HOPE...


GROCK WAITED... AND YEARNED. AND THE FLAMING DEATH MOVED CLOSER. BUT IN THE END, THE WAITING WAS NOT IN VAIN...
WELL, I GUESS WE'RE *ABOUT THROUGH*, AREN'T WE, SIR?
JUST ABOUT! WE'LL BURN OUT THIS LAST PATCH TOMORROW, THEN WE'LL RE-SEED. AND I CAN'T SAY I'M SORRY!


WEIRD, ISN'T IT?
WEIRD... AND DISTURBING. SOMEHOW, I ALMOST FEEL AS IF THE PLANET KNOWS IT'S BEING KILLED...


EVERY NOW AND THEN, I GET A... WELL, CALL IT AN *EMOTION!* IT'S AS IF SOMETHING... SOMEONE... WERE REACHING INTO MY MIND...
ON *THIS* PLANET, MASON?
IF YOU'RE SUGGESTING THAT THERE IS AN INTELLIGENCE HERE WHICH WE'VE *OVERLOOKED*, JUST TAKE A LOOK AROUND YOU! SPIKED PLANTS, A FEW SKELETONS. THAT'S ALL THIS PLACE HAS MANAGED TO *PRODUCE!*

YOU NEED A *CHANGE*, MASON! WE *ALL* DO! WHY DON'T WE SLEEP OUT IN THE *OPEN* TONIGHT? MAYBE THE *FRESH AIR* WILL WASH THE *BOGEYS* OUT OF OUR MINDS.

GROCK SHIVERED. IT WAS TOO MUCH TO HOPE FOR. GROCK HAD WISHED SO HARD... FOR SO LONG. AFTERWARD, HIS WISH CAME TRUE...

BLASTED EMPTY, USELESS PLANET! IT GIVES ME THE CREEPS!

AFTERWARD, GROCK COULD HEAR THE WORDS AND NOT CARE. HE COULD FORGET THE FLAMES AND THE BURNING, EVEN WHEN THE CAPTAIN HIMSELF MUTTERED IN HIS SLEEP...

...NO... INTELLIGENT LIFE... NOTHING THAT... THINKS... BURN IT... BURN IT ALL... START OVER...

LATER, GROCK WOULD CARE. BECAUSE THERE WOULD BE NO MORE MEN, AFTER TONIGHT. NOT FOR A LONG, LONG TIME. BUT THAT DID NOT MATTER NOW...

FOR NOW, GROCK LET HIS CREEPERS DOWN... GENTLY...

MAN HAD RETURNED, AT LAST, AND GROCK WAS CONTENT. IT HAD BEEN SO LONG SINCE ANY ANIMAL HAD VENTURED NEAR HIM...

THE MEN STRUGGLED...CALLED OUT. FROM THE SHIP, A SLEEPY VOICE ANSWERED. A FIGURE APPEARED IN THE PORT, WEAPON IN HAND...

W-WHAT GOES *ON* OUT HERE? CAN'T A GUY GET SOME *REST!* I... *WHAT THE...!?*

THE TREE, HOAD! THE TREE'S ALIVE! SHOOT! SHOOT...

GROCK SHUDDERED, DROPPING THE MEN, AS THE STREAM OF DESTRUCTIVE ENERGY FROM HOAD'S WEAPON DISINTEGRATED HIS TRUNK...HIS FEEDER-ROOTS...

GROCK'S SAP RAN. HIS VINES DROOPED, STRING-LIKE HIS LEAVES CURLED. AND DARKNESS BEGAN TO NUMB HIS PERCEPTIVE SENSES. VAGUELY, HE COULD HEAR THE MEN... SENSE THEIR VOICES, FADING...

THERE WAS YOUR *INTELLIGENT LIFE,* CAPTAIN! *THAT TREE!*

INTELLIGENT? HOW CAN YOU *SAY* THAT, MASON? IS A *"VENUS FLY-TRAP"* INTELLIGENT? CAN IT *THINK?* CAN IT *FEEL?* CAN IT *REASON?*

GROCK WITHERED. HIS SENSES REELED. THEIR VOICES WERE ONLY WHISPERS NOW...

CAN *YOU* SAY A "VENUS FLY-TRAP" *CAN'T* THINK... *CAN'T* FEEL... *CAN'T* REASON, CAPTAIN?

RIDICULOUS! WHO EVER HEARD OF AN *INTELLIGENT TREE?*

GROCK DIED. HIS LEAVES DROPPED LIKE PAPER BITS, TORN BY CHILDREN AND TOSSED TO THE WIND. CHILDREN WHO COULD NOT UNDERSTAND, BECAUSE IT WAS BEYOND THEIR LIMITED IMAGINATIONS...

ALL RIGHT! LET'S GET GOING! IT'S ALMOST DAWN, ANYWAY! BURN OUT THAT LAST PATCH, INCLUDING MASON'S INTELLIGENT TREE! WE'VE GOT TO BE ON OUR WAY!

LATER, THE SHIP ROSE INTO THE MORNING LIGHT. BEHIND IT, THE PLANET LAY BLACK AND SCORCHED AND STERILE. THE CAPTAIN TURNED TO MASON...

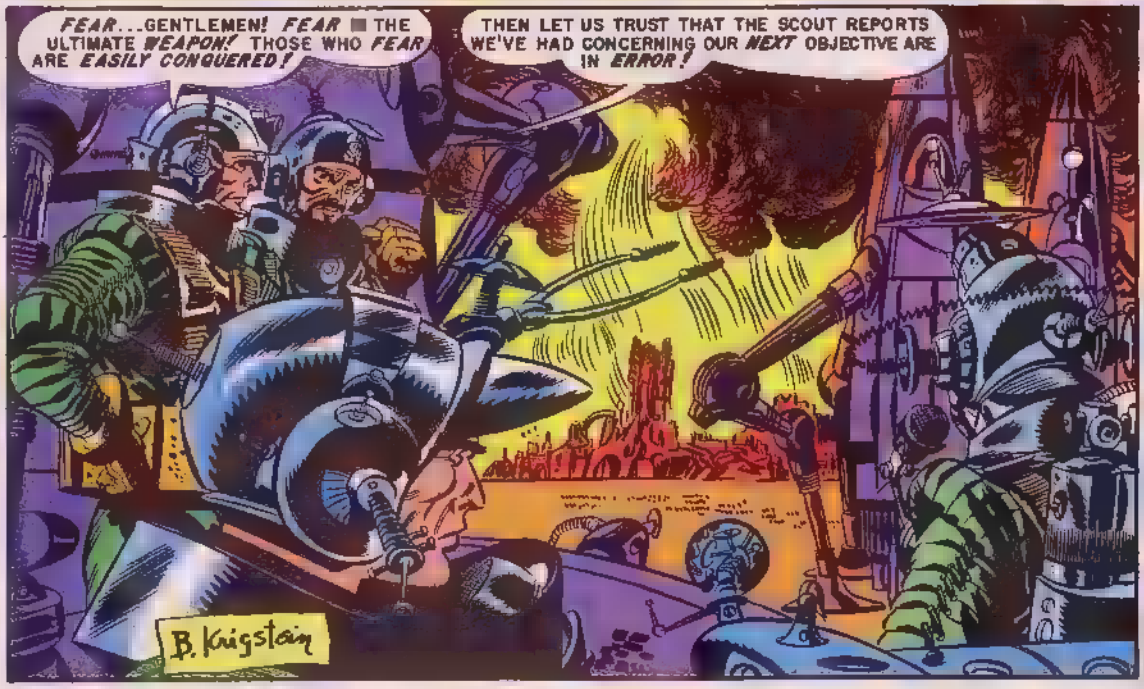
IF THAT TREE *WAS* SO INTELLIGENT, MASON, WHY COULDN'T IT *COMMUNICATE* WITH US?

PERHAPS IT *TRIED,* CAPTAIN! PERHAPS *WE WEREN'T INTELLIGENT ENOUGH TO HEAR IT!*

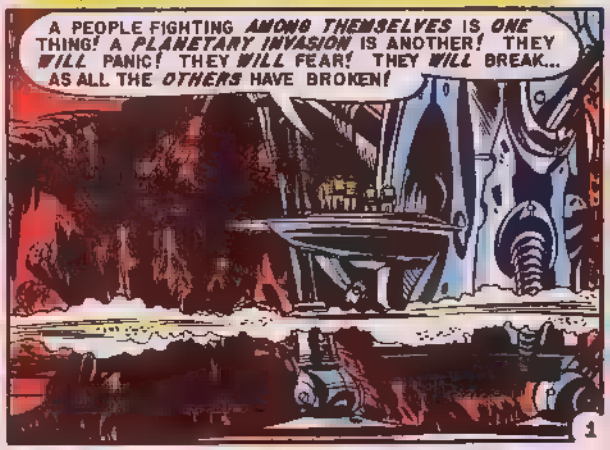
THE END...

THE ULTIMATE WEAPON

GURT WAS PLEASED. THE DESTRUCTION HIS SHIPS HAD WROUGHT WAS ALMOST ABSOLUTE! MARS WAS A GUTTED RUIN! ONE MORE LINK IN THE CHAIN OF CONQUESTS THE FLEET HAD FORGED ACROSS A DOZEN SOLAR SYSTEMS SINCE LEAVING NMENTH, ITS HOME PLANET. NOW, THE COLONISTS FROM NMENTH COULD COME AND SETTLE, UNOPPOSED. BUT THAT WAS NOT GURT'S AFFAIR. GURT WAS A SOLDIER. HIS INTERESTS WERE IN TACTICS...WEAPONS...



GURT TURNED TO ANDGE, HIS SECOND IN COMMAND. ANDGE WAS BECOMING AN ANNOYANCE...WITH HIS ETERNAL PESSIMISM...



TIGHT-LIPPED, GURT RETURNED TO HIS OBSERVATION OF THE RUINED MARTIAN CITY. BUT... BLAST THAT ANDGE! THE MOMENT'S PLEASURE WAS SPOILED, NOW! IT HAD BEEN LIKE THIS JUST BEFORE THE ATTACK ON MARS, TOO! ANDGE... AND HIS PESSIMISM...

NO WEAPONS! VIOLENCE PRACTICALLY UNKNOWN! THEIR *FEAR QUOTIENT* SHOULD BE *EXTREMELY HIGH*... ALMOST *UNLIMITED!* EXCELLENT! *EXCELLENT!*

NO WEAPONS, *YES!* BUT THE REPORT ALSO STATES THAT MARTIANS HAVE AN *ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY*... ALMOST AS FAR ADVANCED AS *OURS!*

YES. JUST BEFORE THE ATTACK ON MARS, WHEN THE FLEET'S SCOUT SHIP HAD RETURNED WITH ITS OBSERVATION-REPORTS, ANDGE HAD BEEN PESSIMISTIC AS USUAL...

IF THEY *FIGHT?*

THEY WILL *NOT* FIGHT!

BUT IF THEY *DO...?*

THEY *WILL NOT!* THEY WILL *FEAR!* FEAR WILL NOT *LET* THEM FIGHT! YOU *FORGET* YOURSELF, ANDGE! *I* AM IN COMMAND HERE! *I DECIDE* WHICH OBJECTIVE WE CAN TAKE AND WHICH OBJECTIVE WE CANNOT! AND I SAY...

WE ATTACK!

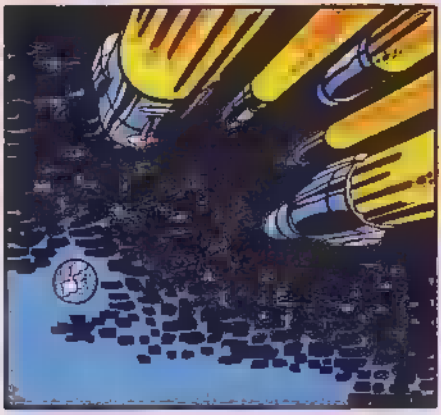
GURT COULD SMILE NOW... GRIMLY... REMEMBERING HOW THE ATTACK HAD PROGRESSED. YES, HE'D BEEN RIGHT! HIS DECISION HAD BEEN CORRECT...

WHEN THE NMENTH INVASION FLEET HAD SET DOWN, THERE'D BEEN NO RESISTANCE. THE TERRIFIED MARTIANS HAD COWERED AND SURRENDERED... THEIR EYES BULGING WITH THE FEAR GURT HAD PREDICTED WOULD BE THERE...

AND, AS IT HAD BEEN WITH MARS, SO WOULD IT BE WITH THE FLEET'S NEXT OBJECTIVE! GURT SHOOK HIS HEAD. ANDGE WAS A FOOL. A PESSIMISTIC FOOL...

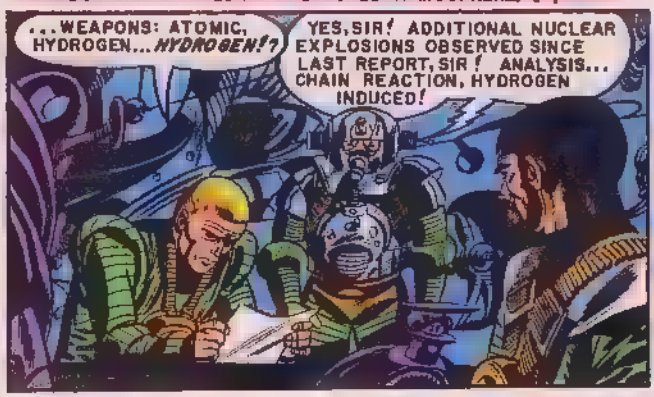
OUR WORK ■ DONE HERE! ANDGE... YOU WILL ARRANGE FOR THE USUAL OCCUPATION FORCES TO REMAIN UNTIL THE COLONISTS ARRIVE! THEN, REJOIN ME ABOARD THE FLAGSHIP! WE BLAST OFF WITHIN THE HOUR...

AND YET, LATER, GURT COULD NOT HELP WONDERING. THIS NEXT PLANET. THIS... EARTH. ITS PEOPLE WERE NOT LIKE THE OTHERS. NMENTH'S PLAN OF CONQUEST HAD BEEN FORMULATED EONS AGO. THIS... EARTH... HAD BEEN UNDER OBSERVATION FOR A LONG TIME. AND THE REPORTS HAD BEEN...DISTURBING...

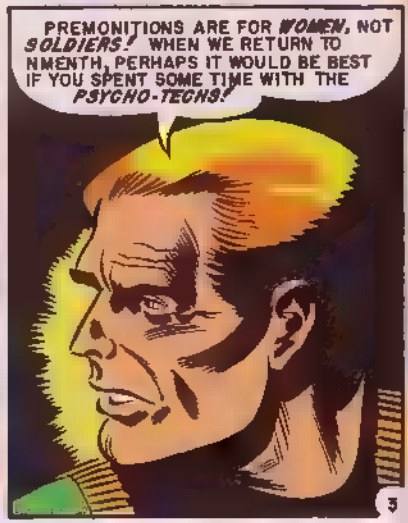


THE OBSERVATION SHIP WHIRLED UPWARD TOWARD THE FLAGSHIP LIKE A SILVER WHEEL. GURT WATCHED IT ON THE VIEWER AS IT NEARED THE LOCK WHERE THE SPACE-SUITED COUPLING CREW WAITED...

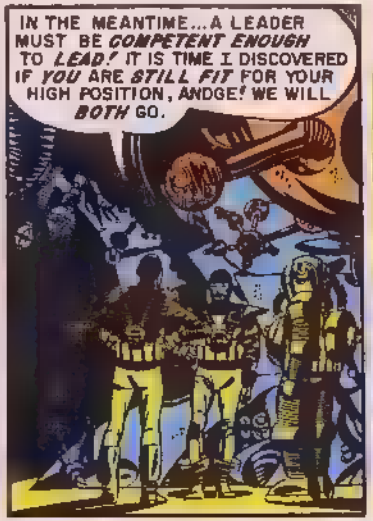
COUPLING THE TWO SHIPS' AIR LOCKS WAS A SIMPLE MANEUVER. MOMENTS LATER, THE SCOUT WAS IN GURT'S QUARTERS... CLUMSY IN THE SUIT MADE NECESSARY BY THE FACT THAT THE SMALLER SHIP CARRIED NO PRESSURED ATMOSPHERE. . .



GURT SIGHED IN ANNOYANCE, ANDGE AGAIN...

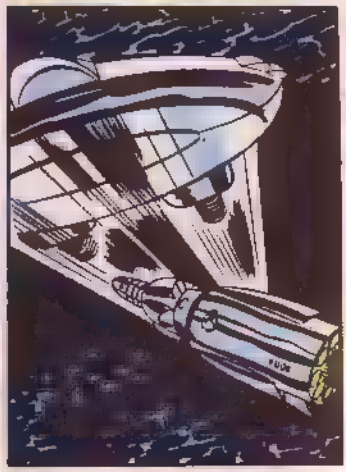


GURT MUSED A MOMENT. THEN...

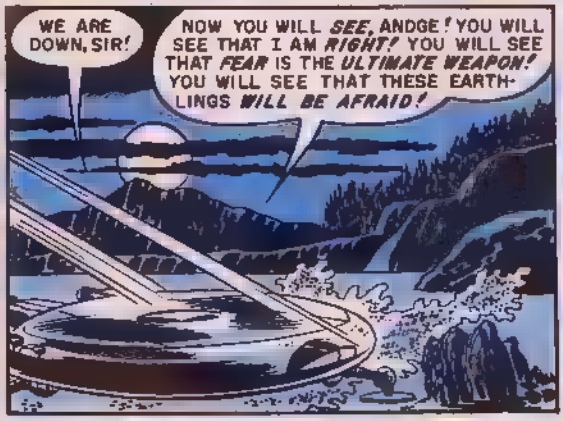


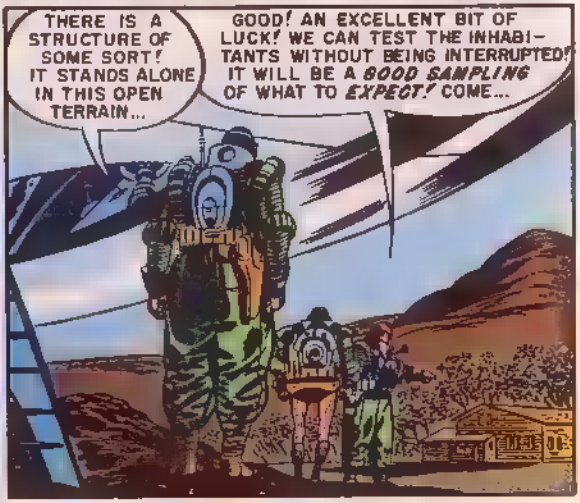
IN THIS CASE, PERHAPS PERSONAL OBSERVATION WOULD BE BEST. BUT GURT COULD NOT ADMIT THAT, EVEN TO HIMSELF. SOON, HE AND HIS SECOND COMMAND WERE READY...

AND MOMENTS LATER, THE SCOUT SHIP UNCOUPLED FROM THE FLAGSHIP AND WHIRLED AWAY TOWARD EARTH...



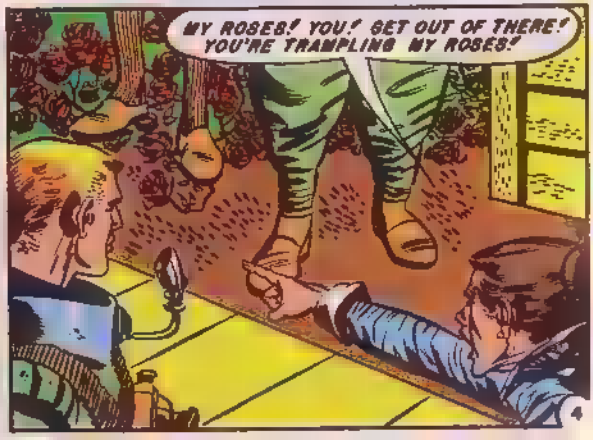
ON THE WAY DOWN, GURT NERVOUSLY OCCUPIED HIMSELF WITH THE EDU-LATOR, THE DEVICE WHICH WOULD IMPLANT A KNOWLEDGE OF EARTH'S MAJOR LANGUAGE IN HIS BRAIN AUTOMATICALLY, WITHIN MOMENTS. THEN...





THERE WAS A BUTTON BESIDE THE DOOR TO THE STRUCTURE! A SIGNALLING DEVICE, NO DOUBT, GURT DEPRESSED IT. THE REACTION OF THE FEMALE WHO OPENED THE DOOR IN RESPONSE TO THE BUZZ WAS MOST GRATIFYING...

IT WAS ALL THERE. SHOCK. CONSTERNATION. SURPRISE. AWE. BUT ONLY FOR A MOMENT. SHE STARED PAST GURT... AT ANDGE... AND HER EXPRESSION CHANGED...



IT WAS INCREDIBLE, GURT SHIVERED, ALMOST. THE WOMAN WAS...FURIOUS! BECAUSE OF THE OOD BLOSSOMS AT ANDGE'S FEET! AND THE FEAR! THE FEAR WAS GONE...

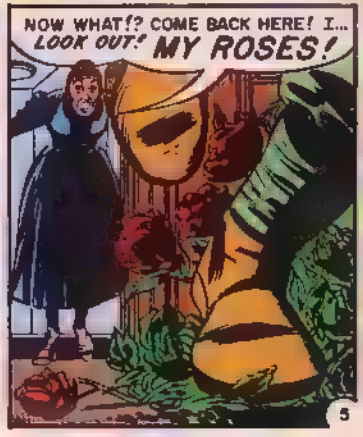
THEY FOLLOWED HER INSIDE THE STRUCTURE, CAUTIOUSLY, THEIR HANDS ON THEIR SIDEARMS...

THE WOMAN STOOD WITH ARMS FOLDED...DEFIANT...ANNOYED...STUDYING THEM AS THOUGH SHE HELD THEM IN CONTEMPT...

THIS FEMALE! IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE! SHE WAS NOT AFRAID. ONLY PEEVED. AND HER EYES GLINTED WITH A KNOWING INTELLIGENCE...

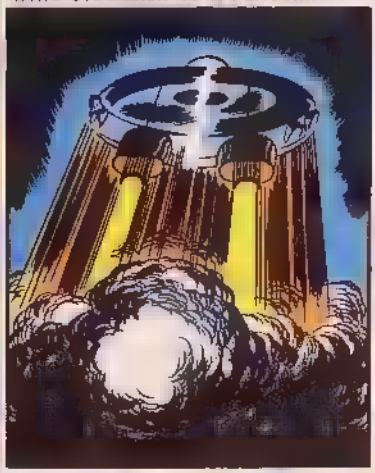
SO THAT WAS IT! A TRAP! GURT COULDN'T BELIEVE IT, BUT THERE IT WAS! HE ASKED NO MORE QUESTIONS...

PANIC CAME LIKE A WAVE, WASHING OVER HIM, DROWNING OUT REASON IN ITS CLOYING, CHOKING TASTE OF TERROR...



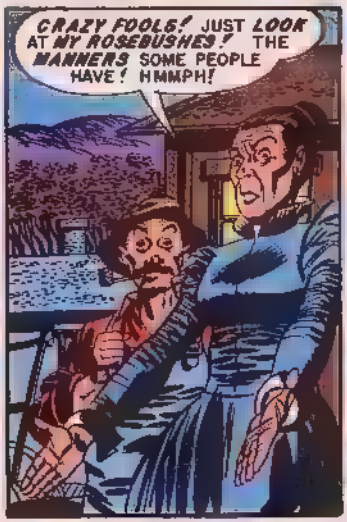
FEAR CAME...

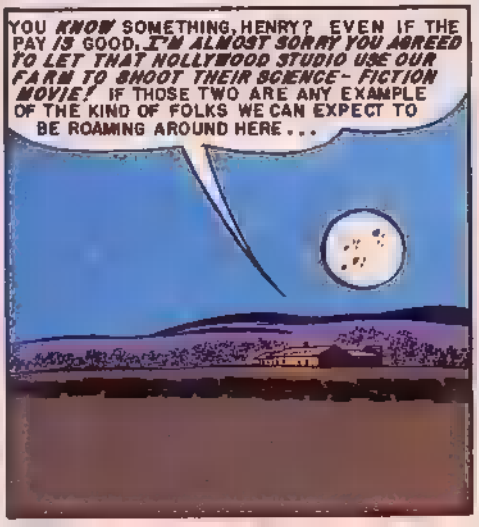
FEAR CAME AND DROVE A SPINNING DISC BACK TO A FLAGSHIP...



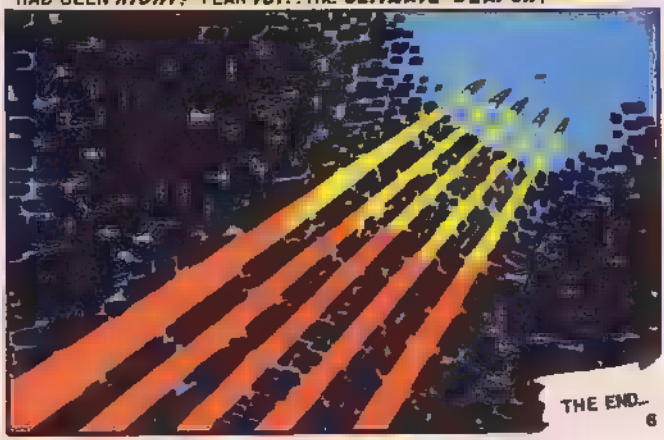
FEAR CAME AND DROVE AN INVASION FLEET BACK INTO THE VAST VOID FROM WHICH IT HAD COME...

AND ON EARTH, A FARMER IN A MODEL-T FORD, RETURNING FROM TOWN, LOOKED UP AND MARVELED AT THE STARS...



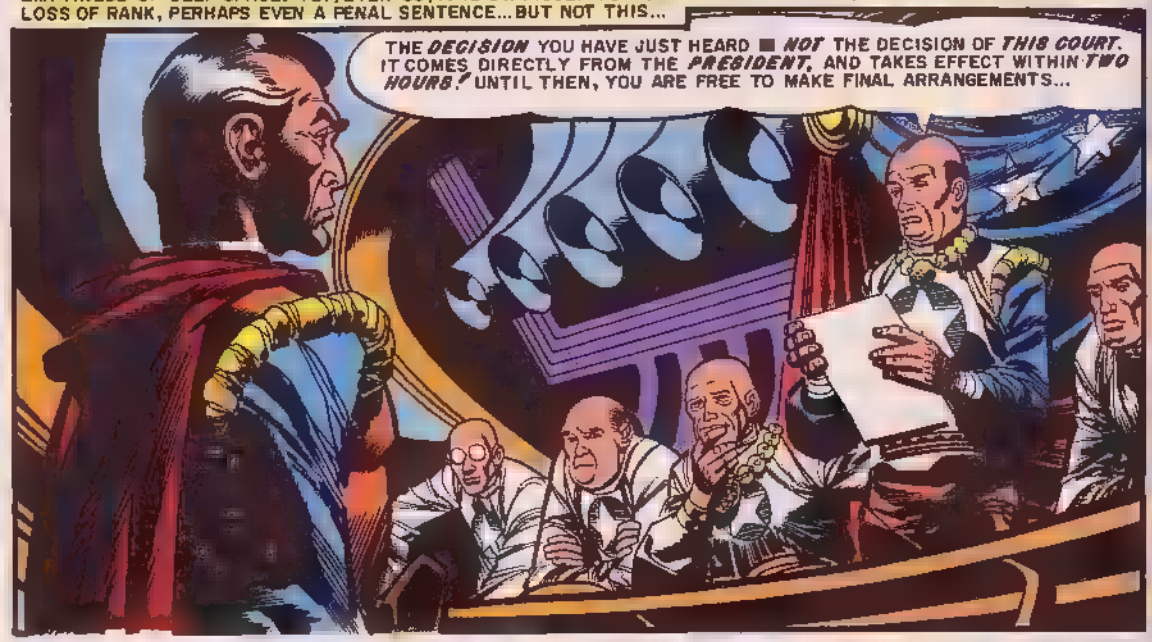


GURT SAT ■ HIS FLAGSHIP, SHAKING HIS HEAD AS THE FLEET STREAKED HOME. AND THE PITY OF IT WAS, HE'D NEVER KNOW ABOUT HENRY! OR HENRY'S DEAL! OR THAT HE'D MADE HIS POINT! GURT HAD BEEN *RIGHT!* FEAR *IS*...THE *ULTIMATE WEAPON!*

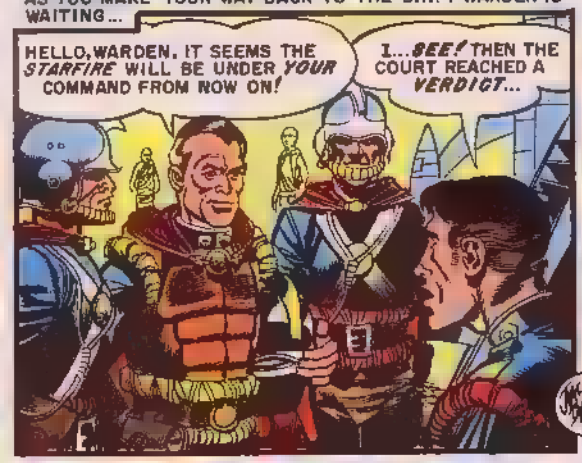


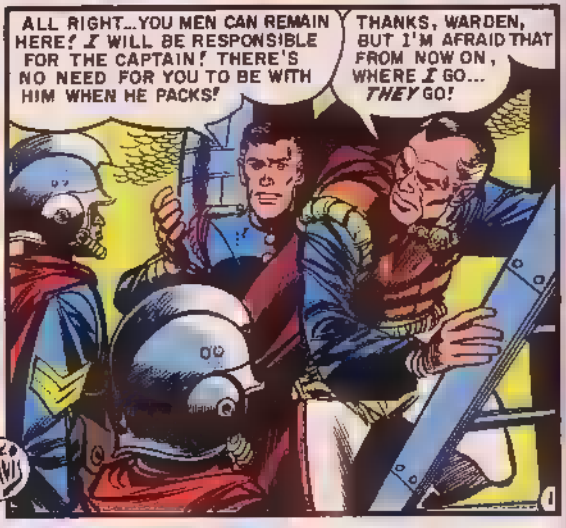
MARKED MAN

THE COURT-MARTIAL ADJUTANT GIVES YOU YOUR REWARD FOR TWENTY YEARS OF SELFLESS DEVOTION TO DUTY ■ A FEW TERSE, CRISP PHRASES... AND THE VERDICT STRIKES YOU WITH THE IMPACT OF A PHYSICAL BLOW. YOU'VE LIVED BY AN IRON CODE OF SELF-DISCIPLINE, BUILT UP OVER HALF A LIFETIME IN THE HARSH, DIAMOND-HARD EMPTINESS OF DEEP SPACE. YET, EVEN SO, IT IS DIFFICULT TO KEEP YOUR FACE CALM, IMMOBILE. YOU HAD EXPECTED LOSS OF RANK, PERHAPS EVEN A PENAL SENTENCE... BUT NOT THIS...

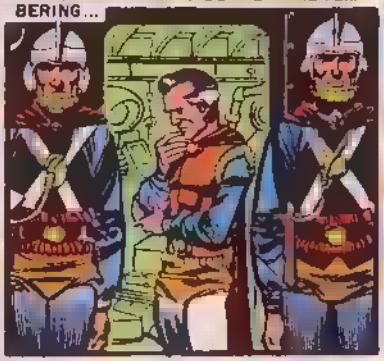


YOU SALUTE, TURN ON YOUR HEEL, AND LEAVE. AN ESCORT OF TWO ARMED GUARDS FALLS ■ BEHIND YOU AS YOU MAKE YOUR WAY BACK TO THE SHIP. WARDEN IS WAITING...

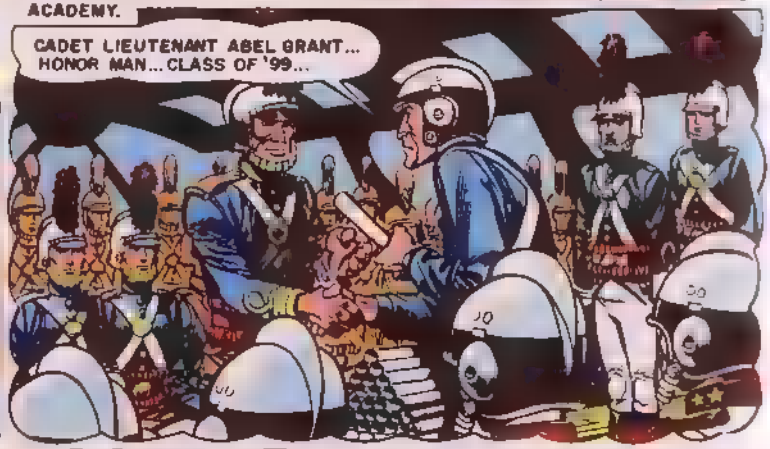




THE GUARDS ESCORT YOU TO YOUR QUARTERS AND THEN STAND STIFFLY OUTSIDE, WAITING. BUT YOU DO NOT PACK. YOU LOOK AROUND AT THE ALLOY WALLS OF THE *STAR-FIRE*. YOU STAND SILENTLY...REMEMBERING...

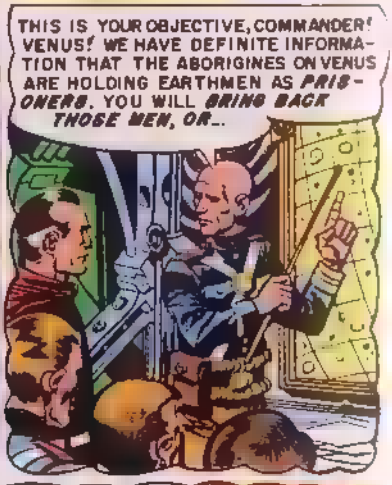


YOU REMEMBER HOW IT ALL BEGAN...GRADUATION EXERCISE AT THE SPACE ACADEMY.

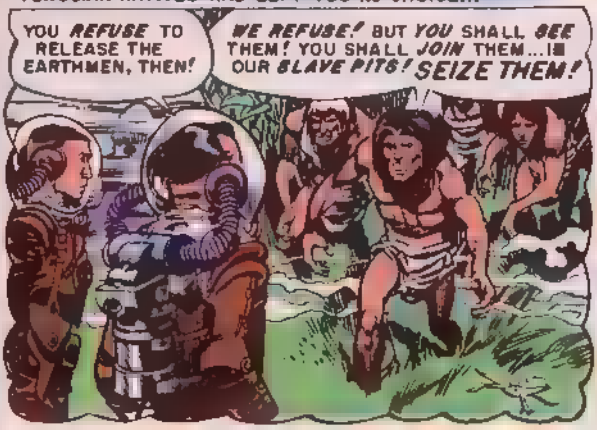


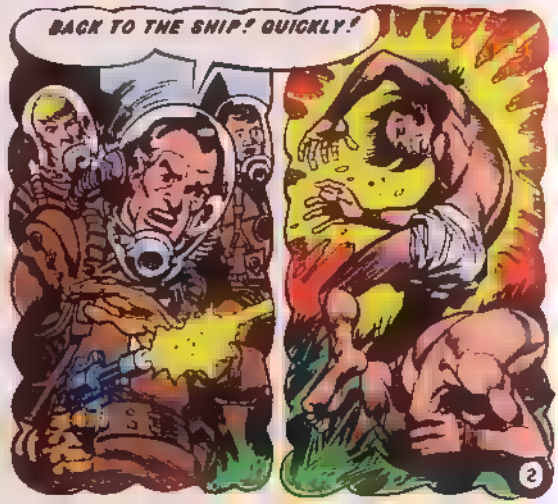
THERE'D BEEN NO APPLAUSE...NO CHEERS, NOT FOR YOU! EVEN THEN, IT HAD BEEN THE SAME! ALWAYS, YOU HAD BEEN DIFFERENT! STERN... DEDICATED... LIVING ONLY FOR THE DAY WHEN YOU WENT INTO SPACE AT LAST...

THAT FIRST SPACE CRUISE...IT HADN'T BEEN PLEASANT! YOU HADN'T BEEN POPULAR. BUT YOU WERE ACCUSTOMED TO THAT. AND IN THREE YEARS, YOU'D BEEN GIVEN THE BRASSARD OF A LIEUTENANT-COMMANDER...



...OR MAKE CERTAIN THAT SUCH AN INCIDENT DOES NOT HAPPEN AGAIN! THOSE WERE YOUR ORDERS. AND THE VENUSIAN NATIVES HAD LEFT YOU NO CHOICE...





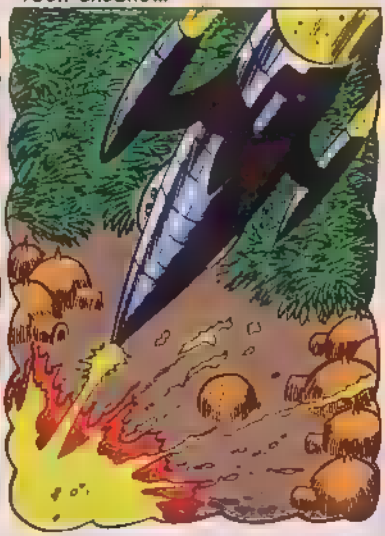
NO! THE VENUSIAN ABORIGINES HAD LEFT YOU NO CHOICE. SPACE TRAVEL HAD STILL BEEN IN ITS INFANCY THEN. AND EARTHMEN COULD BE SAFE IN THE SYSTEM'S FAR FLUNG WIDE WORLDS ONLY IF THEY WERE RESPECTED AND FEARED...

TAKE HER UP, LIEUTENANT WARDEN! I WANT THAT CITY OF THEIRS *BLASTED TO ATOMS!*

THE *CITY!?* BUT... SIR! *THAT'S* WHERE THEY'RE HOLDING THEIR *PRISONERS!*

I DON'T LIKE IT ANY MORE THAN YOU DO, LIEUTENANT. BUT I'VE GOT TO DO MY JOB! *TAKE HER UP!*

THE CREW HAD MUTTERED, NOT UNDERSTANDING. BUT YOU'D HAD YOUR ORDERS...



YOU'D LEFT NOTHING LIVING BEHIND YOU. AND FROM THAT DAY ON, YOU KNEW EARTHMEN WOULD BE SAFE ON VENUS. BUT YOUR CREW HAD NOT SEEN IT THAT WAY, AFTERWARD...

I'M PUTTIN' IN FOR A TRANSFER...

THAT DAY, FOR THE FIRST TIME, YOU'D WONDERED IF THE CODE YOU'D CHOSEN FOR YOURSELF WAS TOO HARSH ... TOO UNCOMPROMISING...

BUT, NO! SPACE WAS NOT A PLACE FOR SOFTNESS! YOU'D GONE ON! AND YOUR REPUTATION HAD BROUGHT YOU EVERY UNWANTED, TOUGH, DIRTY ASSIGNMENT IN THE BOOK...

AS OF TODAY, YOU WILL BE IN COMMAND OF *EXPERIMENTAL ROCKET X-37!* YOU KNOW WHAT WE *WANT*, COMMANDER!

YES, SIR! FULL DETAILS ON *PERFORMANCE*, STRESSING *MAXIMUM RANGE* AND EFFECTS OF *LIMITED OXYGEN* ON THE EFFICIENCY OF *MEN!*

YOU'D TAKEN THE X-37 OUT, THREE MONTHS IN DEEP SPACE... FAR BEYOND THE LIMITS MAN HAD YET PROBED...

TEN-HUT!

SIR, DON'T BE *TOO HARD* ON THEM! THE MEN ARE AS *TIGHT* AS *DRUMS!* IT'S BEEN A *LONG CRUISE* AND...

THE CRUISE HAS ONLY *JUST BEGUN!* AND I WILL HAVE *NO BRAWLING* ABOARD *MY SHIP!* EACH OF THESE MEN WILL SERVE *FOURTEEN DAYS IN THE BRIG!*

HOW THEY'D HATED YOU. BUT YOU'D DONE WHAT YOU'D BEEN ORDERED TO DO. YOU'D GASPED WITH THE OTHERS WHEN YOUR OXYGEN SUPPLIES BEGAN TO PETER OUT...

ON...YOUR...FEET! WE STILL...HAVE...A ROCKET TO MAN...

YOU'D GASPED...AND YOU'D BROUGHT YOUR SHIP HOME. AND THE MEN HAD SPREAD THE WORD. THE REPORTERS HAD COME FLOCKING...

I UNDERSTAND YOU LOST *TWO MEN*, COMMANDER! ISN'T THAT A *HIGH PRICE* TO PAY JUST TO TEST THE EFFICIENCY OF A *NEW SHIP?*

IT COULDN'T BE HELPED. I HAD MY ORDERS! MAN'S *DESTINY* LIES IN THE *STARS!*

MAN'S DESTINY... OR *YOURS*, COMMANDER? AMBITION CAN DRIVE A MAN TO *GREAT LENGTHS!*

I *HAVE* NO AMBITION... EXCEPT TO *SERVE EARTH!* GOOD DAY, GENTLEMEN!

YOU'D MEANT THAT! FROM THE HEART! BUT THE NEWSMEN HAD THOUGHT OTHERWISE...

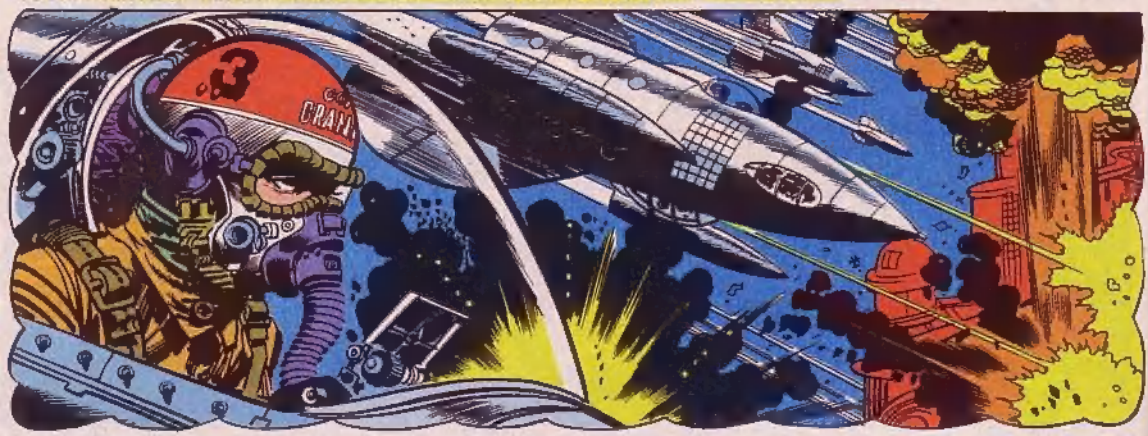
...AND IT SEEMS TO THIS REPORTER THAT *NO* MAN SHOULD BE GIVEN THE RIGHT TO SACRIFICE *HUMAN LIVES* FOR THE SAKE OF *PERSONAL GLORY*...

THE FOOLS! OH, THE FOOLS! YOU'D DONE YOUR BEST, AND THEY'D TORN YOU TO BITS! IT WASN'T *WORTH* IT! ALMOST, YOU'D BEGUN TO *BELIEVE* THAT! AND THEN THE SHIPS FROM BEYOND PLUTO HAD STRUCK...

THE SHIPS HAD STRUCK... AND YOU'D LEARNED AT LAST *WHY* YOU'D BEEN ORDERED TO TEST THE X-37...

WE'VE KNOWN FOR *SOME TIME* THAT THIS ATTACK WAS COMING, COMMANDER GRANT! THEY'RE FROM *DAREN*, A COLD STAR BEYOND PLUTO! WE NEEDED SHIPS THAT COULD *STRIKE BACK*...AT THEIR *HOME GROUNDS!*

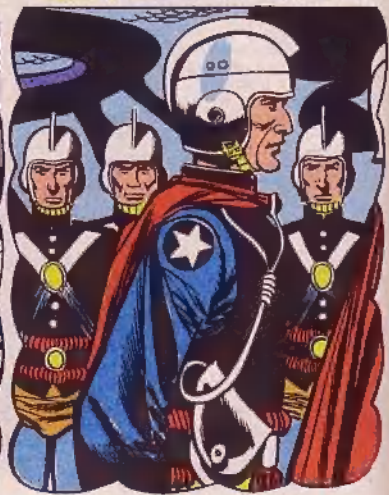
AND SO, AS THE ONLY MAN WHO'D EVER TAKEN A SHIP THAT FAR INTO SPACE, YOU'D LED THE RETALIATION FLEET TO *DAREN*... A HUNDRED SHIPS...AND FIVE THOUSAND MEN WHO HATED YOUR INSIDES...



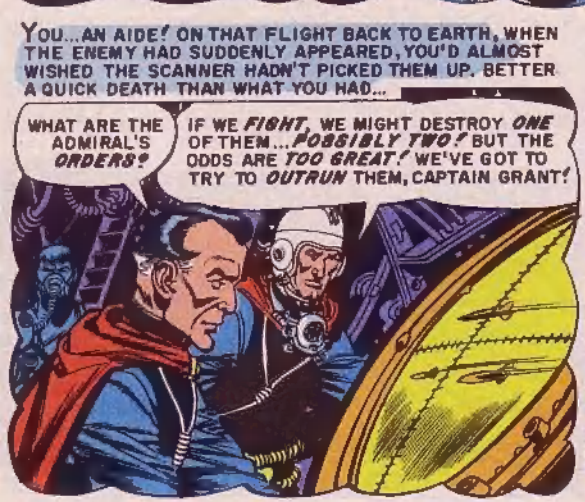
THEY'D MADE YOU A CAPTAIN FOR THAT. AND YOU'D FADED BACK INTO OBSCURITY. THE WAR HAD GONE ON...YOU'D FOUGHT... AND THEN, THERE'D BEEN THAT FATAL DAY...

IN THE END, YOU'D BECOME NOTHING MORE THAN A GLORIFIED CHAUFFEUR. THE GRAND ADMIRAL OF THE FLEET HAD CHOSEN YOUR SHIP... TO CARRY HIM ON AN INSPECTION TOUR...

TWENTY YEARS... AND THAT HAD BEEN YOUR REWARD. HOW IT HAD RANKLED. HOW THE CONTEMPT HAD STABBED AT YOU FROM TEN THOUSAND EYES ON A DOZEN OUTPOST ROCKET FIELDS...



YOU...AN AIDE! ON THAT FLIGHT BACK TO EARTH, WHEN THE ENEMY HAD SUDDENLY APPEARED, YOU'D ALMOST WISHED THE SCANNER HADN'T PICKED THEM UP. BETTER A QUICK DEATH THAN WHAT YOU HAD...



THE ADMIRAL HAD ORDERED YOU TO RUN...BUT THE ENEMY HAD BEEN FAST... TOO FAST...

IT HAD BEEN A DANGEROUS PLAN... A DELICATE MANEUVER, BUT YOU WERE USED TO THAT KIND OF PRESSURE, YOU WERE A SPACE-MAN...DIAMOND HARD...

YOU'D ELUDED THEM. THEY'D SHOT AWAY INTO INFINITY, SEARCHING FOR YOU, AND THE *STARFIRE'D* HEADED HOME ...TO EARTH. AND THEN, ONE WEEK OUT, IT'D HAPPENED...

SUDDENLY, THE ADMIRAL HAD FAINTED. HE'D BEGUN TO GASP... HIS SKIN GREYING...

THE *STARFIRE'S* MEDICAL OFFICER HAD BEEN BLUNT...

IT HAD BEEN A DIFFICULT DECISION TO MAKE, BUT YOU'D MADE IT, AND THE YOUNG LIEUTENANT HAD STARED AT YOU.

BUT CAPTAIN! HIS FUNERAL...

I HAVE NO TIME TO *ARGUE*, LIEUTENANT! YOU WILL *OBEY!* IF *NOT*, I KNOW HOW TO *DEAL* WITH *MUTINY!* WHAT I AM ORDERING IS FOR *THE GOOD OF ALL!*

YOU HADN'T WANTED IT THAT WAY, BUT HOW COULD YOU HAVE EXPLAINED IT TO HIM ...TO THE MEN...WHAT YOU AND THE DOCTOR KNEW? THERE MIGHT HAVE BEEN PANIC! WHEN THE LIEUTENANT CAME AT YOU, WHAT ELSE COULD YOU DO?

YOU'D STOPPED HIM WITH A STUNNING BLAST AND THE MUTINY HAD DIED A'BORNING. THEY'D OBEYED ...

AND SO, A CAREER HAD ENDED. TWENTY YEARS. YOU'D KNOWN HOW IT WOULD BE...BACK ON EARTH. THE COURT-MARTIAL HADN'T SURPRISED YOU...

THE ADMIRAL DESERVED BETTER. HIS BODY SHOULD HAVE BEEN BROUGHT HOME!

THAT WILL *DO*, LIEUTENANT! YOU WILL *ANSWER* QUESTIONS... NOT GIVE *OPINIONS!*

YOU'D SAT THROUGH IT ALL, SILENTLY, GRIMLY! THE *STARFIRE'S* MEDICAL OFFICER HAD GIVEN HIS REPORT AND YOU'D TESTIFIED BRIEFLY. YOU'D DONE YOUR DUTY AS YOU'D SEEN IT...FOR THE GOOD OF ALL... FOR EARTH. THAT HAD BEEN YOUR CODE... ALL OF YOUR LIFE! NO, THE COURT-MARTIAL HADN'T SURPRISED YOU. ONLY THE VERDICT...

WARDEN ENDS YOUR REVERIE...YOU RISE WITH A SIGH...

THEY'LL BE HOWLING AT MY HEELS, WARDEN, BUT I'LL *GO ON...AS ALWAYS!*

GO ON!? YOU MEAN THE SENTENCE *WASN'T* DEATH...THE PENAL COLONIES?

NO, WARDEN! NOT THE PENAL COLONIES! IT SEEMS THAT CERTAIN MEN HAVE BEEN FOLLOWING MY CAREER FOR *SOME TIME!* MEN WHO *UNDERSTAND* HOW DIAMOND-HARD SPACE IS AND THAT *ONLY* A DIAMOND CAN *CUT* A DIAMOND!

IN YOUR HEART, YOU'D ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT IT MIGHT END LIKE THIS. IT HAD TO. AND YOU WONDER NOW, AS YOU TELL WARDEN THE VERDICT, WHETHER A LIFETIME OF LONELINESS HAS BEEN WORTH IT...

THEY'VE MADE ME *THE NEW GRAND ADMIRAL OF THE FLEET,* WARDEN!

THE END